

Research Note

The Symbolic Instrumentality of Asia for Japanese Contemporaries

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As a part of our quest to uncover ways in which we can make use of historical endeavors to enlighten our understanding of Asia as a non-congruent entity that connects people across borders and coordinates their lives in a more multicultural manner than ever before, the current investigation will focus on the symbolic instrumentality of “Asia” for the people of Japan today. My specific interest will be to examine how imagined Asia operates as a cushion to be placed in between national conservation and speedy global flow –as much as Japan’s historical pasts and future venues– in order to facilitate the gradual transformation of public consciousness in the direction of cultural openness at a time internationalization continues to be regarded as an all-too-radical move to make on the collective basis.

By fantasizing Asia as an internationally assembled *communitas* that mediates domestic statics and exotic dynamics, Japanese contemporaries try to construe their positioning in an ever globalizing world without the fear of losing their cultural ground (Figure 1). In the contemporary Japanese worldview, “Asia” is signified as a complex network that acts as a go-between domestic

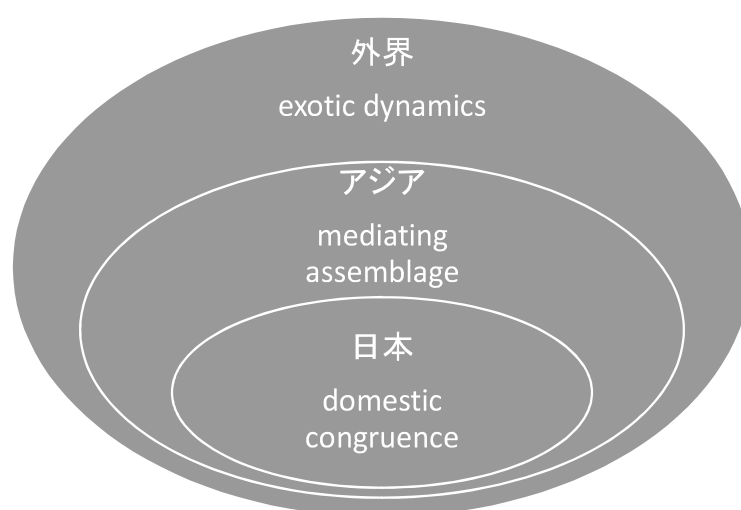


Figure 1. A Regional Paradigm for Japanese Contemporaries

terrain and global arena. Asia is and must be, in this sense, “transient.” The idea of “Asian community (アジア共同体)” is therefore unrealistic regardless of frequent political campaigns that call for the development of Asia’s regional congruence. In what follows, I will empirically elaborate on this point in reference to my ethnographic observations and interviews.

Since the summer of 2004 when the current investigation was germinated, I have cumulated interview data from nearly three dozen Japanese informants, both male and female, whose ages ranged between 20s and 60s. Through these interviews, I have been trying to identify the social meaning of Asia, as well as specific events that were attributed to the meaningful construction of Asia by the people of Japan today. Pseudonyms are applied for those of my informants whose names are mentioned in the following discussion.

Asian Unity as a Revisited Political Ideal

Asia’s regional unity has been a long held political ideal since the ideas of territorial integrity, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence as proposed by Jawaharlal Nehru were unanimously adopted in the Bandung Conference of 1955. Boosting Asia’s cross-national exchanges in earnest was an idea put to forth in the 1993 APEC Summit held in Seattle Washington, wherein Japan’s Prime Minister of the time, Tomiichi Murayama, called upon participating national leaders to develop partnerships for progress and thereby enhance regional institution building in order to avert subregional trade wars and protectionisms at the same time as stimulating trade creations. In agreement with this call, the U.S. President of the time, Bill Clinton, proposed a vision of “Asia-Pacific Community (アジア太平洋共同体)” (Hadi 1995 : 85).

This bureaucratic vision was brought to national attention upon the change of regime in 2009 from the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to supposedly more liberal and pro-democratic Democratic Party (DP), when the latter party leader and a new Prime Minister of the time, Yukio Hatoyama, dedicated a prospectus to the electric version of New York Times (dated 27 August, 2009) and proposed that Japan’s new government was willing to persuade neighboring Asian nations to create a regional framework that could guarantee “stable economic co-operations and international security.” Hatoyama stressed that such a framework was to be grounded in regional monetary integrations, and it was intended to outlast any global financial crises which the current system of reserve currency based on U.S. Dollars may cause in future.¹

While economists in the U.S. criticized Hatoyama’s proposition as being anti-American, Japanese critics disapproved it as being unrealistic. An economic journalist Suzuka Yoshida outlines

1 From ‘A New Path for Japan’ by Yukio Hatoyama in the August 27, 2009 issue of *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/opinion/27iht-edhatoyama.html>).

the point as follows :

[Hatoyama's] discussion of common currency emerges from international ties that assemble a mechanism in which the central bank is shared under a certain political framework. Such a mechanism can ensure economic freedom. Yet, this is not the kind of discussion that can be exchanged with other Asian countries which are not parts of Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) or Free Trade Agreement (FTA).²

Thus stated, Yoshida condemned Hatoyama for not exposing his will to work toward developing within Asian region free trade negotiations, common financial markets, mechanisms to reconcile political interests as well as to ensure regional security, or encouraging free exchanges of skilled labor.

While this statement reflected a perspective generally held by neoliberal businessmen and conservative bureaucrats in Japan, activist oriented journalists pointed out that the DP regime had been too meek in putting its vision of Asian unity into practice in the face of "North Korean and Communist Chinese threats." A critic Takashi Hachiya, for example, contended that both Hatoyama- and succeeding Kan administrations retreated to the conservation of U.S.-Japan alliance upon their realization that remnants of Cold War were difficult to resolve. Although other Asian nations began to advance regional co-operation through international dialogues such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Six-Party Talks which have been taking place in Northeast Asia, Japan's DP administration had not been able to clearly designate the country's role in these emergent Asian network buildings.³

In my own interview with a prefectural assembly member from Okinawa (male in his 60s) in the summer of 2010, the "scars of war" was revealed as a determinant factor of the hesitant attitude that was presented to the world by the Japanese government against taking any incentive roles in the concretization of Asian unity. He elaborated :

Postwar Japanese politics has been internally complicated by recurrent impositions of war responsibilities by other Asian countries such as China and Korea. Japan's governmental leaders are so apprehended by two mutually conflicting perspectives that they cannot pose any definitive opinions, or demonstrate any definitive positions, in Asia's regional diplomacy.

2 This statement is excerpted from the October 2, 2011 issue of *Nikkei Business Online* (<http://business.nikkeibp.co.jp/article/world/20091222/211793/>).

3 Excerpted from Takashi Hachiya blog (<http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~hb1t-hcy/thesis66.htm>).

“Two mutually conflicting perspectives” in this interview citation revolve around the problem of Japan’s war apology to other Asian nations : on the one hand, Japan is considered to have not as of yet made sufficient atonement beyond formal apologies for its national crimes committed during and before the Second World War (including issues of colonization, annexation, massacre, and comfort women) ; on the other hand, repeated apology demands from other Asian countries could be regarded as diplomatic tricks that aimed to maintain the characterization of Japan as a compensator for other Asian countries (in forms such as Japan’s contribution to Overseas Development Administration [ODA] in excess of 3 trillion yen). Such an ambivalent positioning of Japan in the diplomatic arena of postwar Asia was identified as a gigantic obstacle to the development of intergovernmental solidarity.

The intricate tie between Japan’s war crimes and the prewar Japanese vision of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (大東亜共栄圏) seemed to have discouraged Japanese contemporaries from getting actively involved in Asia’s solidarity building. Most of my informants who were in their 50s and 60s, and were more competent about the Second World War, shared the idea that the current political debate on Asian unity may provoke old memories of Japan trying to colonize other Asian nationalities in the name of liberating these nationalities from Western colonialism. These informants typically pointed to the fact that the vision of Asia’s co-prosperity was used back then by Japanese fascists as an ideological means to expand Japan’s overseas territories. These informants also felt that other Asian nationalities that had to suffer from Japan’s colonial domination may very well be angry to this day, and that such a sense of anger could be trans-generationally long lasting.

Other, more nationalistic informants of mine shared a militant view that Japan should not ever recover friendship with its former enemies, most notably Communist China and Korea. These informants pointed to international debates and conflicts over the territorialities of Senkaku Islands/Diàoyútái Qúndǎo and Takeshima as markers of Asia’s internal conflicts that prevented any effective unity from being realized. One of these informants, Kenji, was a male university student in his early 20s. Influenced by his ultra-right father, this student enrolled in a private university in Tokyo with nationalistic school spirit. With a major in political science, he aimed for a political office upon graduation. When I asked him about the possibility of Asian unity in the face of the growing flows of people, resources, and trends across Asia’s national borders, he said :

Yes, but no matter how socially or economically “regional” we become, many Japanese citizens will continue to reject countries that treat Japan with hostility. Both Senkaku Islands and Takeshima were parts of Japan, and China and Korea are using Japan’s war crime as their excuse to invade our territories. These nations are apparently propagating Japan as a peril in Asia

without ever appreciating how much Japan had been contributing to Asia's regional progress – ideally, economically, and financially– since the dawn of our modernity.

His view resembled that held by 3 other right-winged informants of mine, even though he was the youngest of all. When opinions such as this was added up to those of my other informants that had been mentioned already, a paradigm of Japan as being caught in between and betwixt Asia's intergovernmental peace negotiation and international conflict could be mapped out. My interviews thus far demonstrated a common sense among Japanese politicians, bureaucrats, and politically informed citizens that Asian unity was fragile enough to collapse easily into cross-national turmoil without diplomatic cautions.

Asia as the *Communitas* of Self Exploration

My informants who regarded themselves as “commoners” were generally careless about political debates on Asian unity. In the process of interviewing these Japanese individuals, which included students and businessmen whose ages ranged between 20s and 50s, I was able to uncover two mutually corresponding aspects which could be attributed to what I would like to call “popular perspectives on Asian assembly” : the stance that cultural flows and social exchanges across national borders were compiling in Asia to make the region a hybrid entity of cross-cultural assemblage –regardless of how politicians and bureaucrats tried to characterize the regional integration ; and the posture that Asia ought to be preserved as a non-congruent public sphere that mediated domestic life and ever-globalizing universe in which Japan constituted a part.

Asia in such a context signified a playful atmosphere in which peoples from neighboring Asian countries could generate and reproduce sociohistoric forces and relations as they were stimulated by ideological encounters and material exchanges –both within and outside the sphere as a whole or any area in particular. Individuals in this conceptual terrain could enjoy developing a complex series of communication techniques, increased literacy, as well as market economy premised on greater choice and competition –all without losing their social grounds. In this line of thought, one informant of mine, a 27 year old male graduate student Kazu, specified as follows :

I see Asia as an emergent self-examining ground for the Japanese people. In this sizzling contact zone of our modern era, we can see domestic and exotic values interact and hybridize. In this process, we can observe and learn what can and cannot connect politically, economically, and custom-wise. We can reflect upon our heritage with respect to how the people of our neighboring countries react, and how we react to that reaction –in ways we would have never done before.

Elsewhere, this informant suggested as a backdrop of his statement that Japan in many respects was still a culturally closed society. Japanese tendencies to conserve their own world against external forces could be sensed, for example, from how poorly most people in Japan comprehended English after all these years of making the language a mandatory part of the nation's formal education. In his view, therefore, Asia provided Japanese contemporaries with a protective outer layer that mediated internal and external cultures. Using Asia as a mirror, the people of Japan could deal comfortably with cultural flows from abroad, and selectively incorporate what they found to be suitable into their lifestyle, in this era of globalization.

In agreement with this view, another informant, Akiko who was a housewife in her 50s, indicated that Asia functioned in her life as a space of self-refreshment, exploration, and enrichment :

From time to time, I travel to other Asian countries such as Korea, China, Taiwan, and Thailand. I feel so good travelling to these countries because it gives me a chance to learn more about the world outside of my own in a more or less familiar way. I mean, neither as a totally different cultural experience as in travelling to Europe or America nor as a totally familiar and comparably boring manner as in spending the same amount of money and energy to travel domestically –which, of course, is okay sometimes. I really enjoy discovering many things, including what I am and where I come from, in this mysterious mid-space that opens up between familiar and different worlds, as well as between not so familiar and not so different worlds. This is why Asia is so attractive to me!

Such a statement projected Asia as an assembly of mutually variable national cultures within a proverbial social geography. Regarding the non-congruent quality of Asia, this informant saw the very value of self-exploration in the transient quality of Asia. For her, Asia's internal ethnic and cultural variation was all the more "complicated and exciting" at the same time as "close to home" than the "distant and monotonous exoticism" she sensed during her travels in Europe and North America.

A series of group interviews I conducted with the sum total of 19 informants revealed that while these informants typically excluded Japan from other Asian countries when they spoke about "Asia," they were capable of reflexively re-contextualizing Japan as an inclusive part of Asia. When this was done, they commonly imagined Japan as being wrapped up by Asia like a cocoon in which Japan was transforming from the previous, less mobile state of national being to a more open and flexible state. In a class of 14 college students, a 21 year old female student pointed out that recent influxes of popular culture from Korea, China, and other Asian countries, alongside the booming of ethnic foods and products in Japan, were "opening up the Japanese

mind at last!" She thought that the Japanese people were being internationalized in the way they were not under all these years of Western influences. Other members of the class joined in agreement with her opinion. Subsequently, another student, Chiaki, a 22 year old female, stated :

Just as the outer layer of cocoon consists of a tangled thread that was good for weaving, Asia, when I think about it, is tangled in social ties with other Asian countries that can be untangled and used to weave out our future mode of living. By making reference to Asia, we the Japanese may be able to fly out into the world like a butterfly.

As idealistic as it may sound, such a metaphor of Asia appeared to aptly represent how Japanese contemporaries perceived Asia as a fantastic world into which one can step out, explore, and possibly transform oneself through various encounters –some of which are more or less familiar and others more or less exotic. To borrow from Victor Turner, Asia, in this sense, functioned as *communitas*, or the manifestation of collective desires to reflexively restructure their current state of existence through comprehensive symbolic inspirations (Turner 1967, 1969).

The Popular Cultural Construction of Asian Congruence

In *communitas*, traces of congruence is evident in the form of *liminal* experience, or the shared feeling of social equality and togetherness as manifested in fantastic occurrences of some sort. The modality of social relationship in this state of being is distinguished from the area of common living, and participants may sense changes in their positions, acquire transient humility, and feel as if they had reached a higher state of existence. As an acute point of community, *communitas* allows the members of a community to collectively transform themselves from one level of social wellbeing to another (Turner 1969 : 94–96, 102–106).

One Asian domain in which such a sense of collective transition was felt by my Japanese informants was popular culture : the spread of Japanese and Japanese-style pop culture across East- and Southeast Asia over the last three decades or so, known as "J-wave (日流)," followed by the flow of Chinese pop culture or "C-wave (華流)" and a more recent "K-wave (韓流)" from Korea, were perceived to have drawn vastly developing countries in Asia closer to each other through fantastic means. These waves of trend could be considered to have inspired the participants of Asia's industrial economies to construe and construct the urban lifestyle of emergent middle class at the same time as contesting their local identities through marketing and purchasing powers. The series of disseminations, exchanges, and interplays between Japanese, Chinese, and Korean pop songs, movies, television melodramas, street fashions, and *manga* as well as anime in an ever wider region of East- and Southeast Asia provoked the collective experience of Asia as moving

in the direction of cultural congruence wherein the people of Asia were being transformed into cosmopolitan subjects regardless of their nationality or locality.

To elaborate on this aspect, I generated consecutive dialogues with 17 of my informants with a focus on the dissemination of Japanese popular culture in Asia. I referred to the fact that Japanese trendsetters have been stamping undeniable footprints of J-wave –alias Cool Japan (Figure 2) – on Asian consumer culture over the last three decades with intended and unintended consequences : e.g., the influx of Japanese pop idols into the Chinese market since 1980s that started with a legendary Momoe Yamaguchi (山口百恵, active 1973–1980) ; the production of Chinese pop idol groups such as Shanghai Performance Doll (上海勁舞娃娃, debuted 1996) after Japan's Tokyo Performance Doll (active 1990–1996) and Osaka Performance Doll (active 1993–1997), Taiwanese idol groups such as Hey Girls (黑澀會美眉, active since 2005) after Japan's Morning Girls (モーニング娘, active since 1997), Korean idol groups such as KARA (카라, active since 2007) and Girls' Generation (소녀시대, active since 2007) after Japan's MAX (active 1995–2002), and Indonesia's JKT48 (debuted 2011) after Japan's AKB48 (active since 2005) ; the growing popularity of animated characters such as Doraemon, Hello Kitty, and Ultraman in Chinese and Southeast Asian markets since 1970s, 1980s, and the turn of the millennium, respectively ; the popular dissemination of a serialized morning television drama *Oshin* into Vietnam and Indonesia in the mid 1980s, and that of prime time TV drama *Tokyo Love Story* in the mid 1990s ; the culinary habitation of *sushi* and *donburi*, let alone *teriyaki* and *ramen*, throughout Asia's urban centers over the last twenty years or so, and offshoot-ed debates on the “cultural propriety” of Japanese food such as *sushi* ; and the more recent fads of *cosplay* in Asia's urban centers ; and the phenomena of “Japan craze” in Taiwan in 1990s and Thailand in 2000s.

A group interview with 6 of the 17 informants (Japanese university students in their 20s) revealed that J-wave could index Japan's national power in other Asian countries, just as C-wave or K-wave could easily signify an ever-mightier presence of Chinese or Korean



Figure 2. A 2006 Cool Japan campaign poster featuring a pop idol duo, Puffy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

national power throughout Asia today, and that these national powers commonly signified the advanced state of urbanity. One of these informants, Saki (21 year old female), recalled feeling “neat” when she visited Bangkok and found out how enthusiastically people celebrated J-wave in Thailand : she saw Japanese and pseudo-Japanese inscriptions on Thai products and realized that they were carelessly inscribed : she viewed countless TV commercials in which Japanese models appeared, but could not recognize any of them because they were all locally hired average Japanese : and she was occasionally approached by Thai youngsters who kept stressing how “cool and superb” J-waves were. She thought that Japan and the Japanese could be so “economically powerful” abroad, and she wished she could use the opportunity to market herself if she could stay longer.

Another informant Hisashi (22 year old male) shared his experience of seeing people celebrating Japanese *manga* and anime as the emblem of high modernity in Indonesia. He found that native cartoonists –professional and amateurs alike– were not only trying to assimilate the styles of Japanese *manga* and anime into their own artworks, but were also enthusiastically trying to adopt the urban contents of J-*manga* (such as metropolitan amenities and lifestyles) into their own lifestyle. Consequently, Hisashi felt that the inner-city spaces of Jakarta were beginning to resemble those found in Tokyo and therefore invoking the sense of inter-social congruence. This situation was similar to those shared by my 3 other informants who stayed in Manila, Philippines.

The allegorical power of J-wave to develop cultural congruence in Asia could occasionally be shattered by counter-hegemonic reactions –as in the case of “Japan craze” or *harizheng* (哈日症) in Taiwan back in 1990s. Drawing a parallel between Japan’s colonial aggression in the early modern era and present day influx of Japanese products into the Taiwanese market, critics including Jiaowen Qiu (邱淑雯), Tianduo Li (李天鐸), and Jiaxin Xu (徐佳馨) professed that the spread of J-wave in Taiwan is a form of national invasion, and J-wave devotees or *harizu* (哈日族) are “cultural dupes” who ended up being absorbed by Japanese corporations (quoted in Ishii 2001).⁴ Upon being mentioned about such an incident, most of the 17 informants I interviewed stated that it was a rare occasion, or perhaps a problem of older generation with which they were not concerned. Shun (male, 22 years old) emphasized how fortunate he felt to see the members of postwar generation in various parts of Asia coming together to share similar lifestyles without having have to inherit the kind of racial, ethnic, or national prejudices that their forefathers tended to hold against each other. He elaborated :

It is not good to ignore history, I know, and to not think about what Japan did to other Asian

4 For an earlier critique see also Chuang (1989).

countries in the past. Yet, historical procrastination is equally bad, I think. We [the youngsters of postwar Asia] did not commit those war crimes in the first place, nor do we ever want to!

Hisashi (mentioned earlier) provided a similar opinion on this issue, and said that it is much worse to remain in a mode of historical conflict than to go on with the flow of Asia's open regionalism. As he continued :

We should be thinking about how people of different Asian nationalities can work together to create a better world, and I believe that popular cultural flows –J-wave, K-wave, or otherwise – can offer great contributions to develop the world of friendship where people of different racial, ethnic, national and historical backgrounds can come together to exchange lifestyles, share cool ideas, and enjoy fantasies!

When pushed to seek their future prospects on the positioning of J-wave in Asia, my Japanese informants all indicated that the status of J-wave in this particular region will depend on what specific messages J-wave will provoke in relevant destinations. These informants further wished that J-wave keep operating as an instrument of cross-cultural understanding in Southeast Asia through a series of cooperative efforts by Japanese and local governments as well as industries. They thought that the spread of J-wave in other Asian countries may indeed be the outcome of Japanese national and corporate powers to set up infrastructures for local distribution, and to distribute technologies of popular cultural production in the process, but more appealing to them was the idea that J-wave could cultivate common grounds of interest between Japanese and other nationalities in terms of “what's cool” today.

Thus, one may infer from these interviews that the building of pan-Asian identity may be possible by means of popular fantasies. However superficial such an identity may be, it speaks to the generational soul of younger people. A complicated symbol with multiple meaning, J-wave can become a projector of collective taste at the same time as a referent point of sociopolitical debates. Whether or not to treat J-wave as an index of Japan's neocolonialism is a matter of intellectual debate, but J-wave can certainly homogenize its recipients' ethos by virtue of its allegorical appeal. J-wave was shown to enlighten some of my informants by way of informing how other Asian nationalities perceived Japanese nation, government, industry, history and/or people.

In questioning whether the world was becoming “Japanized” through J-wave, Koichi Iwabuchi contended that the tremendous diffusion of Japanese commodities articulated the universal appeal of Japanese cultural products and the disappearance of any perceptible “Japaneseness,” which is subtly incorporated into the localization strategies of the media industries. Thus, the cultural in-

fluence of J-wave tended to be an “invisible colonization” (Iwabuchi 2002 : 33). Iwabuchi used the term “cultural odor” to emphasize the manner in which certain popular commodities, in the process of transnational consumption, came to represent cultural features of a country in which these commodities originated –as stereotyped images or ideas of the country’s national lifestyle in most cases. He stated that Japan’s invisible colonization was reflected in the fact that J-wave was “odorless” in countries where the wave was distributed, implying that Japanese consumer goods in these countries lacked any influential idea of Japan (2002 : 27,28).

I propose with respect to my findings that the cultural odor of J-wave is a matter of sensitivities and attitudes of those who make use of J-wave in and outside of Japan. There is no way of predetermining exactly how influentially J-wave can function as the building block of Asia as a congruent entity, but it may very well function as a congregator of peoples’ competences, dreams and imaginations about the modern way of life.

Concluding Remarks

While Asia’s regional congruence has been projected as a diplomatic dream by Asia’s intergovernmental negotiations and organizations, my current ethnographic survey based in Japan demonstrated the shared understanding of politico-economically conscious subjects that there is a long way for the people of Asia to go in terms of realizing Asian unity at this moment of regional sociohistory. Nevertheless, the very aspect of Asian unity as a dream may be contributing to the inter-social assemblage of “imagined congruence” in the form of fantasized urbanity. My interview data suggested that popular culture plays an allegorically important role of signifying, standardizing, and naturalizing such a fantasized unison in places where trends are disseminated.

From the vantage point of a nation-state such as Japan that has long been demarcated by its distinct national identity in Asia, inclinations to open regionalism challenged people to reflect on their national status in the face of speedy cultural liquidation. This marks a new phase in Japan’s modernization, or what Koichi Iwabuchi calls a strategic, historically embedded project of reorienting national position within a familiar narrative of “Asianism.” Japanese interest in its cultural exportation is growing and this tends to be informed predominantly by a historically constituted nationalistic desire for “Asia.” With such a premise, activated popular cultural flows can be considered to induce Japan towards encountering the achievement of capitalist modernity by several neighboring nations –modernity that encompasses both familiar and different modes of cultural production and consumption (Iwabuchi 2002 : 17, 18). My ethnographic observations justified this point by highlighting Asia as an imagined *communitas* into which my Japanese informants stepped out and obtained their understanding of national repositioning without the fear of losing their cultural grounds.

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